

State

Red Lodge celebration turns toxic

By **MIKE STARK**
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A formal party to honor U.S. Marines - including several just back from Iraq - turned into one of the state's largest medical emergencies Saturday night in Red Lodge.

About 200 people were exposed to leaking carbon monoxide at Rock Creek Resort and 42 were sent to hospitals in Red Lodge and Billings.

The incident threatened to overwhelm Red Lodge's Beartooth Hospital, which typically takes in three to four new patients a day, not dozens.

By late Saturday night, sick and injured partygoers, many in formal gowns and dress uniforms, were lined up in hallways, physical therapy rooms and anywhere else there was free space.

"It was just unbelievable," said Dr. Bill George of Billings Clinic Red Lodge, who helped treat patients at Beartooth Hospital. "I don't think you can ever fully prepare for something like this but everybody stayed calm and organized."

No one died - although emergency workers said the threat was certainly there - and by Sunday night, only six remained hospitalized. All were listed in good condition at Billings Clinic.

Those who were at the resort say the situation could have been much worse if the carbon monoxide leak had not been detected and partygoers went to sleep at the resort while inhaling the odorless deadly fumes.

"It could have been very, very bad," said Marine Corps Maj. Kevin Hutchison of Billings, who attended the event.

The sick and injured included four pregnant women, young children, seniors and several active duty Marines. Sen. Conrad Burns, R-Mont., attended the party but left about an hour before several people started showing signs of the poisoning, a Burns spokesman said Sunday night. He did not suffer any ill effects.

The leak apparently came from a furnace in the pool area at the resort.

When it's inhaled, carbon monoxide accumulates in the blood stream and essentially displaces oxygen. Starved of oxygen, the body can start to shut down, causing nausea, headaches, increased heart rate, reduced brain power and other problems. Prolonged or intense exposure can be fatal.

The annual Marines' event is usually held in Billings but, in honor of the 230th anniversary of the Marines, organizers decided to hold it in Red Lodge this year.

"We wanted to do something special," Hutchison said.

Earlier in the day, several of the Marines gathered at Rock Creek Resort to rehearse for a formal ceremony later in the evening. A few complained of being queasy but it was attributed to the altitude, previous exercise or locking their knees while standing, which can slow the circulation of blood, Hutchison said.

Two more Marines were weakened during the formal ceremony just after 6 p.m. They were led to chairs before they passed out. Soon, two women collapsed and several people complained of headaches, nausea and other symptoms, Hutchison said.

And when one of the most physically fit Marines went down - "one of the studliest of the studliest in our group," Hutchison said - the evening took an even more grave tone.

"That was when we knew something was really wrong," Hutchison said.

Suddenly the celebration - which for many Marines was a last hurrah before civilian life - turned into a medical emergency.

One woman cut her head when she passed out. Several people were vomiting and others complained of headaches, chest pain and other problems.

The building was quickly evacuated and a triage system was set up. Emergency personnel from 10 agencies responded, including crews from Joliet, Billings, Cody and Powell, Wyo.

Local medics worked alongside medics from the Air Force, Marines and Navy. More than 100 people were evaluated at the scene. Command units were set up to prioritize care and figure out the most serious cases.

"This is something we train for. In a small town, you always wonder if you're prepared for something like this and this incident went very well for us," said Red Lodge Rural Fire Department Chief Tom Kuntz.

Of those affected, 22 were taken by ambulance to Beartooth Hospital and 20 more went to the hospital on their own.

Hospital officials called in all of their doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers to respond to the emergency. The situation was tense and sometimes chaotic.

"This was the first time we've ever had anything like this," said Sarie MacKay, director of the Beartooth Hospital Foundation.

Oxygen - a key ingredient in treating carbon monoxide exposure - was quickly in short supply. Medical staffers found any source they could, including local dentist offices and bottled oxygen shipped down from Billings. The hospital ran out of oxygen at least once but never long enough to have serious consequences.

What was most difficult, George said, was simply dealing with the crush of patients coming through the door.

"We'd kind of catch up and someone would say there's 15 more on the way," George said.

Luckily, many of the patients were Marines.

"They were all so great," George said. "You really couldn't pick an easier population to deal with. They were organized, they kept their cool, they did what we asked."

Eighteen of the most severely affected were brought to Billings. Three were brought to St. Vincent Healthcare. Two were released later that night and one was released Sunday.

At Billings Clinic, three people had to take turns in the state's only hyperbaric chamber, a pressurized tube that saturates the body with pure oxygen and offsets the toxicity of carbon monoxide.

The treatments have been effective, said Dr. Walter Fairfax, a pulmonary critical care specialist at Billings Clinic.

"They're all doing well," he said.

Those three and three others remained hospitalized Sunday night. Nine others were treated and released at Billings Clinic.

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